Testimony of Jonathan M. Smith  
Executive Director, Legal Aid Society of the District of Columbia

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The Crisis of Poverty in the District of Columbia

The District has been changing rapidly in recent years. For many of the District’s residents things have improved: crime has fallen, cultural opportunities have increased, development is booming, young couples are moving back into the District and baseball has returned. Each of these changes has been the direct consequence of deliberate government policy. The District government has done much to make D.C. a great place for those who can afford to live here.

Unfortunately, not all District residents are benefiting equally. Life has become harder for the one-fifth of the population living below the federal poverty line. For these families, the worsening situation was caused by the same policy decisions that has benefited others.

Low-income housing is evaporating. Throughout the 1990’s, the District lost 6% of its rental housing stock, largely from low-income neighborhoods. At the same time, rents have dramatically increased. The fair market rent for a two bedroom apartment in the District is almost $1300 per month, an increase of 41% from the year 2000. To afford this rent without an unreasonable rent burden, a family must earn more than $50,000 per year.

While the pace of the loss of affordable units may be slowing, the impact of the last decade of development is still being felt. In 2004 alone, 12,000 units of affordable housing were lost and replaced by high cost rentals or high value homes. As a result, the neighborhoods in which poor and moderate income families can live has shrunk, economic integration has declined and the concentration of poverty has increased.

Homelessness in the District is three times the national average. In the cold of the winter and the heat of the summer, the District is notoriously bad at delivering emergency shelter. Downtown shelters have closed, and if replaced, the homeless are forced to the edges of the city to obtain a bed.

The District has a higher rate of child poverty than any State in the nation with nearly one-third of children living below the federal poverty line. The average income for a family in the poorest 20% of the population is just over $6000 per year. The average rent for a two bedroom apartment is just over $14,000. Despite persistent and extreme poverty the District’s cash welfare payment is lower than 30 States. The payment is the same as it was in 1994 -- $420 per month for a family of three.

The burden of poverty is born disproportionately by children, women, African Americans and Latinos.
Eighty-four percent of residents in high poverty neighborhoods are African American compared with 60% of the District-wide population. Whites, who make up more than 30% of the District population, are only 7.2% of the population in poor areas. Latino and Asian representation is also increasing in high concentration of poverty areas with Latinos making up 5.3% of these communities and Asians 2.1%.

Children experience poverty at a higher rate than any other age group with 33% of children 0-5 living in poverty and 31.7% of all children under 18 being poor. African American children have the highest rate of poverty at 37.6%. Fewer than two-third of mothers receive adequate pre-natal care and, while declining, the District’s infant mortality rate remains at nearly 11 per 100,000. Almost 10% of District households are food insecure (inadequate funds to purchase food on a reliable basis) and nearly 3% of households go without food for some portion of each month.

More than 110,000 District residents live below the federal poverty line and tens of thousands more survive on incomes that any reasonable measure would consider poor. Poor District residents are extremely vulnerable. Having made small gains during the boom years of the 1990’s, these families are now slipping deeper into poverty. According to the United States Census Bureau, since 1990 the rate of poverty has increased and the incomes in low-income communities have declined.

Despite these dramatic increases in the cost of living, wages for workers in the lowest quintile of the workforce have not increased, and indeed, with inflation, the value of most low-wage salaries has decreased. As a result, low-income District residents must expend increasing percentages of their income on housing costs. Fifty percent of households in the District pay more than 30% of their income for housing (defined as an excessive cost burden) and one in four pay more than 50% (severe cost burden). Two-thirds of very low-income households (persons living at between 30% and 50% of the median income) and 71% of extremely low-income households experience an excessive cost burden. Nearly 60% of District residents are renters and one-fourth of renters live below the federal poverty line. For every ten very low-income families living in the District, there are only 8 affordable housing units.

**The District Can Dramatically Reduce Poverty**

We urge the District to adopt a deliberate policy of reducing poverty. The program should include specific targets for poverty reduction and concrete strategies that will increase incomes and wealth amongst the District’s poorest residents. Its success should be measured by the families that it lifts from poverty, not by the number of poor families that are forced to move from the District.

Ending poverty will require a multi-pronged integrated strategy. It must include:

- Increased affordable housing. This includes workforce housing as well as housing for those living on a very low-income.

- Increased the quality and quantity of work. The District needs to take steps to support the creation of good jobs for residents, implement programs to prepare workers and create a jobs environment that will
support a middle class. Key to a successful jobs strategy is the increase in the minimum wage to a living wage and support measures such as mandatory paid sick days.

- Ensure that all working parents have access to quality and affordable child care. Coupled with care, these programs should focus on early childhood educational development, including reading readiness.

- Solve the crisis in education. The focus on education of the Fenty administration is encouraging. It will take years to fix the schools. The District cannot loose interest as it slogs through the myriad of problems that have accumulated over the years.

- Reduce overreliance on the criminal justice system. Over incarceration has harmed poor communities, stigmatized those caught up in the system and locked families in poverty.

- Ensure that all government supports are linguistically accessible and accommodating of persons with disabilities. Often language and disability are impoverishing conditions solely because of the barriers they create.

**The District Should Make Economic Integration a Priority**

Deconcentration of poverty should be the highest priority of the plan. Poverty has become more concentrated in the District over the last decade. The number of high poverty neighborhoods has increased dramatically. According to a report by Fannie Mae, “The number of high-poverty census tracts in the city rose from 36 in 1990 to 43 in 2000 and the number of extreme-poverty tracts more than doubled, rising from 10 to 23.” As the number of high poverty census tracts rise, the rate of poverty remains relatively stable. The result is that fewer poor families live in mixed income neighborhoods.

The District is becoming more profoundly economically segregated with each new development project and with each newly gentrified neighborhood and has the largest gap between its rich and its poor of any city in the nation. The economic development in the District is doing little or nothing for low wage workers, recent immigrants, parents receiving welfare, and men and women returning from prison. Deliberate governmental action designed to attract wealthy city dwellers is pricing our client community out of the District and the justice institutions obliged to protect them are beyond reach.

The concentration of poverty magnifies its impact on families and children. While being poor has many negative consequences, living in a poor neighborhood increases the changes that children will have poor educational outcomes, individuals will be victims of crime or involved in the criminal justice system, be a teen mother or have limited access to health services.

Just as the District took deliberate policy steps to encourage high income development, it can create a policy of economic integration. These steps can include:

- Creations of scattered site housing for persons with very low-incomes. This can be done through Hope IV, New Communities, housing vouchers (as long as they pay market rate and source of income discrimination is prohibited) and other strategies.
• Create home ownership opportunities for low-income families in economically mixed neighborhoods through inclusionary zoning, the strategic use of the Housing Production Trust Fund and tax credits.

• Involve residents in the planning of their communities. This is especially true for large publicly funded projects like the baseball stadium. Before building such project, community benefits agreements should be negotiated and communities compensated with services, housing and other benefits to compensate them for displacement.

Conclusion

Poverty is unnecessary. It is a human creation caused by social policy, government action and private greed. It can, and should, be eliminated. This hearing is an important moment in the struggle to end the injustice caused by the denial of access to those without means to the full benefits of our society.

[1] Legal Aid was formed in 1932 to provide legal assistance to families and individuals living in poverty. Legal Aid staff handle cases involving domestic violence, custody, child support, housing, and public benefits.


[10] Id. at 39-40.


[12] The Center for American Progress has developed a 12 point plan to reduce poverty by 50% over the next 10 years. While many of its recommendations focus on the federal government, there are important measures for states and localities. Center for American Progress, “From Poverty to Prosperity: A National Strategy to Cut Poverty in Half,” (April 2007). Available at www.americanprogress.org.


http://www.dcfpi.org/7-22-04pov.htm
